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FORMATION TO INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

A Theological Approach in Forming the Adolescents to Create a Culture of Dialogue

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“How is it possible to live in harmony with other religious traditions?” The research “Formation to Interreligious Dialogue: A Theological Approach in Forming the Adolescents to Create a Culture of Dialogue” is an answer to this question of an adolescent during one of my pastoral experiences. The Indian soil speaks of a history down the centuries where Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, Parsees, as well as several tribal communities, have lived together with cultural and existential

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dialogue with each other. Christianity did contribute greatly to the cultural consciousness and religious traditions in India right from the first centuries. Acknowledging that diversity is seen as richness, the fundamental principle to be practiced by every human person is to give and receive respect with one another.

In India, we now face the rising tide of communalism, fundamentalism and extremism. The widespread presence of terrorism, violence, hate, arrogance and distrust, injustice, poverty and discrimination in South India are not sporadic. The annual report of the Commission on International Religious Freedom in 2020 ranked India as the fourth country of particular concern dealing with matters of religious freedom among its citizens.¹ The growing religious intolerance in our own neighbourhood needs to be discouraged with education and advocacy. At its deepest level, interreligious dialogue is always a dialogue of redemption, because it seeks to discern, illuminate and comprehend better the sign of the age-long dialogue which God continues with humanity.² Interreligious dialogue, therefore, is our cooperation with God's ongoing dialogue with humanity by which we let God be present in our midst, for as we open ourselves to one another, we open ourselves to God Himself. It is therefore a work desired by God, an integral element of the Church's evangelizing mission, which finds expression in our ministry.

The Relevance of the Research

This study is an answer to the growing fundamentalism. This research is relevant because it would pitch in to instruct and form individuals to avoid violent explosion in the name of religion and learn to bring peace to society. In the context of India, educational institutions like schools and colleges can adopt various strategies to promote communal harmony and peace. This research is relevant because the interreligious dialogue that Catholic Church envisaged goes beyond the facts of courteous conversation regarding one's own faith. Forming the young people of our times to interreligious dialogue is an essential duty of everyone. Thus the young partners in interreligious dialogue will become seekers of truth. The unique condition to enter into this pilgrimage for truth is to be open to the Holy Spirit. It considers the formation to interreligious dialogue

¹ Tony Perkins, *Annual Report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom*, Washington D.C., 2020, 5-20.

² John Paul II, "Address to the PCID," 13 November 1992, *Bulletin of the Council* 82 (1993) 6-8.

indispensable today more than ever. Both partners of dialogue require well-grounded knowledge of the particular religious doctrines with a sound faith, supported by spiritual and personal maturity.³

The Objectives of the Study

The Objective of the study revolves around a few questions. Is there a formation to Interreligious dialogue already taking place among the adolescents? Do we require more scientific and systematic formation to interreligious dialogue to be imparted to the adolescents? What methodologies can we identify in order to substantiate the formative pattern for interreligious dialogue? The objective of this study is also to have a deeper understanding of the position of the Catholic Church with regard to the formation to interreligious dialogue. It enables Christians to better collaborate with other religious traditions.

Limitations of the Study

The present study is confined to ten villages in the suburbs of East Bengaluru for verification of the hypothesis. The geographic area of Rural East Bengaluru comes under the Taluk of Bidarahalli in the East Bengaluru district. This geographical area is characterised by the presence of people from all the South Indian States. The culture and the people of this area are open to other religious traditions which become one of the fundamental pre-requisites for the formation to interreligious dialogue. And as such the study does not hold specificities of other communities. The study is again limited in its theoretical approach. All the nuances of the theology of interreligious dialogue, nor the full stretch of Catholic Teachings on other religions and faith are considered here. Only those adjudged pertaining to the objective of the study are taken into consideration. Moreover, the growth of theological discussion within India is not all taken into consideration due to the limitations of space and time considerations due for this study.

Structure and Development of the Study

The study is divided into four chapters with a general introduction and a general conclusion. The thematic expansion and the structure of the chapters are as follows.

³PCID, *Dialogue in Truth and Charity (DTC). Pastoral Orientations for Interreligious Dialogue*, Bengaluru: Kristu Jyoti Publications, 2014, 31.

In the first chapter, the Scriptural and Ecclesial documents are scooped out for a more profound understanding of interreligious relations. It also emphasized the reason behind the formation to interreligious dialogue. While the Old Testament proved the influences of other religious traditions in the very attitude of universalism, New Testament in the person of Jesus and in the witnessing life of the apostolic community gave practical models for formation to interreligious dialogue. The teachings of the Fathers of the Church bring into light the deeper understanding of the need to explain the importance of living in harmony. It will bring forth a summary of the attitude of the Catholic Church towards other major religious traditions. A study of the documents of the Second Vatican Council, Post Vatican Documents and significant teachings of Popes on interreligious relations after the Second Vatican Council will provide the research theme. The chapter is concluded after having given a glance into the attitude of other religions with regard to interreligious dialogue. The process of interreligious dialogue among the major religions had been inattentive in the past. It was the Catholic Church who moved forward for such a process amidst seemingly indifferent or even antagonistic tendencies in other religious traditions.

In the second chapter, fundamentals of the theology of interreligious dialogue confess the God experience of Christianity and other religious traditions. The apparent openness did hit a wall when the adage came to the forefront: *Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus Est*. This maxim did not stop some of the optimistic interreligious relations in the Middle Ages. The gradual openness to other religious traditions initiated in the beginning of the twentieth century through the theory of fulfilment. The basic principles of the Christian faith are explained in the Apostolic Creed. The theological foundations of interreligious dialogue: Trinitarian, Christological, Pneumatological, Ecclesiological, anthropological and theology of the Kingdom of God are explained in the light of the Creed points out that interreligious dialogue is comprehensible only when one is refined in one's own religion.

While considering the foundations of a theology of interreligious dialogue, outstanding disputes that come up are arguments on the uniqueness and universality of Jesus Christ. A Kingdom-centred rather than a Christocentric approach to this problem would help one to accept the other religious traditions and the uniqueness and universalities of Christ. The chapter will also discuss the exclusive, the inclusive, the pluralistic, the cosmotheandric, and the non-

uniqueness models for a theology of interreligious dialogue. The chapter concluded with the argument on the conflict between dialogue and proclamation. The perception of the Catholic Church in the recent decades is new and there is formal and open support to dialogue with other religious traditions.

The third chapter, in the light of the teachings of the Church and epochs of existing skills of the people of India, rediscovered the motives for the formation to interreligious dialogue. World Council of Churches, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences and the regional Bishops' Conferences play a dynamic role in making interreligious dialogue as a way of life. This way of life considered as a walk to the core of every religion demands basic formation. Taking into account, the interpretation of the directives of interreligious dialogue in the pluralistic context of India, the role of Indian Christian theologians is to build bridges between the teachings and the everyday experience of the persons. The approach of the theologians like Raimon Panikkar, Swami Abhishikthananda, Bede Griffiths, D.S. Amalorpavadass, Sebastian Kappen and Mammen Thomas have unwrapped a variety of scopes in exercising interreligious dialogue.

The authentic motivations are figured out from the adolescents themselves. The motivations derived from the experience with adolescents strongly highlighted the need for having a systematic formation to interreligious dialogue. Participatory Observation Method (POM) facilitated to a great extent, the comprehension of the belief system of the adolescents. The major objective of POM was to find those familiar approaches of adolescents toward different religious traditions and practices. In fact, this objective was obtained. POM brought into light the range to which these adolescents are capable of respecting other religious traditions. Through POM, the study focused at getting out of one's own self (system of belief), the capacity to encounter the outer realities and converse with the followers of other religions.

The fourth and final chapter dealt with the practical guidelines on the formation to interreligious dialogue and gave a complete picture of various levels for formation. These are systems aimed at creating a culture of dialogue among people of different faith and religion. The strategies and the action plan provided help to achieve this goal. They are only a few among the many options of practical guidelines for a systematic formation of interreligious dialogue. The strategies and action plans are structured with attention to different walks of life of individuals.

The thesis will conclude with the conviction that the unique way to save our locality, our country and in turn our world is to trust in the power and goodness of the growth of the young generation. As educators of the future generations, there is a dare need to concentrate our attention and our best resources to the children and adolescents in creating a culture of dialogue. The creation of a culture of dialogue through a well stipulated, meticulously planned and systematically implemented formation is the need of the hour. As long as religions embrace a portion of the global population and people differ in their reflection about and within the religious concepts we would require those who are at the formation to engage in interreligious dialogue because the world merits a more equitable and harmonious living. This thesis is an attempt to provide a scientific tenure into the reflection of such a formative scenario.

The Findings of the Research

The hypothesis with which this study had begun assumed that: there had been interreligious dialogues taking place in the Indian society; there had been also riots due to the lack of proper interreligious dialogue; a regular and rigorous formation to interreligious dialogue from younger days of life could have prevented them and hence, an authentic interreligious dialogue is possible only through a systematic formation to interreligious dialogue among adolescents. The need to remove irreligious attitudes as intolerance, hostility, fear, suspicion or indifference from the young minds is the requirement of the hour. The research aimed at getting out of adolescents' own system of belief, challenging them to converse with other religious traditions. The profound study of the Biblical-Apostolic-Patristic context, teachings of the Catholic Church, positions of various theologians and interaction with the adolescents of various religious backgrounds confirmed the hypothesis.

It is affirmed that the formation to interreligious dialogue helped the adolescents to appreciate and engage creatively with other religious traditions. Understanding the history and the present position of interreligious dialogue in the Catholic Church, the indispensability of a systematic formation became evident. The purpose of this study was also to bring modifications in the outlook in understanding the meaning and purpose of formation to interreligious dialogue. Deeper knowledge about one's own religion would help one to prepare for sincere dialogue. The present research that aimed at the formation to interreligious dialogue discovered strategies and lines of action in order to create a culture of dialogue

among the adolescents. The vision and mission statements, proposed strategies and action plans helped to answer the research questions in view of interreligious dialogue as a systematic process.

In conclusion, the formation to interreligious dialogue is a journey both inward and outward of an individual. While it is founded on one's personal convictions and knowledge of one's own faith and tradition, it is also open to those of others which could provide a meeting place in the society. It is already well asserted that there is sporadic and random formation taking place at various levels of the society as there are also extremist ideologies taking root in the society. The way to curb violence and assure serene fraternal co-existence of each individual needs to personalize deeper convictions which, by the order of the day, is necessitated through the rigorous and scientific formation to interreligious dialogue right from the age of adolescents. A formidable formation must stand in good stead for a prosperous and peaceful society; for today and tomorrow.